

## **In love with Shirley, the atomic town**

In a recent article on the editorial page ("In love with Shirley, the atomic town") Sarah Hartmann gives a glowing review of a new book by Kelly McMasters "Welcome to Shirley – a memoir from an atomic town". As ex-employees of Brookhaven National Laboratory and members (officers?) of the Brookhaven Retired Employees Association, we feel it is important to offer a different perspective. Much of McMasters' book is devoted to a condemnation of the Laboratory, and in particular seeks to exploit the notion that the research carried out there has contributed to elevated levels of breast and thyroid cancer, and to a rare form of a childhood cancer called rhabdomyosarcoma. We have long respected the normally balanced and objective tone of the editorial columns coauthored by Ms Hartmann, so we were surprised and disappointed to find that she appears to accept without reservation many of the (numerous misleading, contentious and erroneous???) statements made in the book. In fact, neither of the above claims has ever been substantiated. In 1998, an independent task force appointed by the Suffolk County Legislature chaired by Dr. Roger Grimson at Stony Brook University concluded (1) "*cancer rates of all types of cancer studied are not elevated near BNL*", (2) "*there is no evidence that rates among the four sectors (north, south, east and west) are significantly different from each other or correlated with underground plume and wind directions*", and (3) "*there is no evidence that childhood rhabdomyosarcoma incidence is elevated in Suffolk County or in a 15-mile circle around the Laboratory*". Furthermore, an analysis by the New York State Department of Health in 2001 found that the incidence of cancers among past and present Laboratory employees was similar to that among residents of other parts of the State. McMasters fails to cite these studies in her book; presumably this is not something that suits her purpose. Predictably, however, she cites a study concluding that the only known cause of rhabdomyosarcoma is low-level radiation, but chooses to ignore the statement on the American Cancer Society's website that "*there are no environmental factors known to increase the chance of getting rhabdomyosarcoma*".

Throughout the book McMasters repeatedly asserts that BNL is funded primarily by the Department of Defense. This is simply not true; for example, in 2007, DOD accounted for about *one-half of one percent* of the overall budget, and on average less than two percent in the preceding years, which should not have been difficult to verify (in a "heavily-researched book"???). In fact, it is easy to check that the great majority of the funding is provided by the Department of Energy, and, hardly surprisingly, much of the research is accordingly directed towards (energy-related issues and materials???). Presumably the Department of Defense has a much more sinister aura about it than the Department of Energy!

McMasters' animosity towards the Laboratory is evident in her narrative of the supposed crash of a UFO in Southaven Park in November 1992, a spurious story made up by the Long Island UFO Network founded by John Ford. She states, "Brookhaven officials wouldn't allow anyone other than BNL personnel beyond the park's borders – BNL fire trucks remained posted at all entrances until the weekend – high levels of radiation were recorded by LIUFON – BNL had used a particle beam to zap the craft – the lab's fire brigade had been dispatched to collect the bodies of aliens" and so on. This kind of nonsense might be mildly amusing - if it weren't for the fact that the UFO story is juxtaposed in McMaster's book with an account of the tragic crash of TWA flight 800 and the conspiracy theory that the plane had been downed by a missile. Is the reader seriously supposed to believe that there may be a connection? (For the record, the book conveniently omits the fact that John Ford was arrested in 1996 for plotting to kill local

government officials by radium poisoning, and was committed to a psychiatric institution in 1997).

In conclusion, it is difficult to imagine what purpose a book like this is intended to accomplish, except perhaps to exacerbate relations between the Laboratory and surrounding communities. We hope that this response will restore a degree of objectivity and balance that is lacking in the book and in the review.